

Regarding CC Docket No. 98-67, Comments on Petitions for Reconsideration by several major telecoms and Video Relay Service Providers:

As a hearing person with many friends in the Deaf community, I strongly urge the Commission to establish a rate for reimbursement of Video Relay Service (VRS) providers that is adequate to sustain and further develop the service. At the current interim rate, providers have reduced the level of service offered, and state that they will not be able to continue providing the service at all unless the rate is increased.

The Deaf community and their friends and families are concerned about the possibility of this vital service disappearing, or that their access to it will be diminished. I have seen the difference this service has made in the lives of so many people. One of my good friends told me several months ago that her husband had discovered this service and was thrilled to be able to use it. She said that her husband, for the first time ever, had called her family and chatted with them on the phone for 20 minutes. That had never happened before, and certainly would never have happened with text-based relay! Her family was touched, and felt that they had been able to interact with him “directly” for the first time. Hearing families take for granted the ability to interact with each other and develop and sustain their relationships by phone. This was the first time her husband felt truly a part of the family, able to just “pick up the phone” and have a family conversation.

Several of my friends’ employers have made this service available to them at work. Many of them have commented to me that for the first time in their lives they feel like they are on a somewhat level playing field. For the first time, they can show their employers that they are capable of doing a good job, interfacing with the public, ready for advancement, etc. According to them, VRS has literally opened up new worlds for them.

I know that the Deaf community loves this service. What has surprised me is how much I love this service. I no longer dread phone calls from my Deaf friends. It wasn’t my friends’ fault, it was just that text-based relay is so tedious. VRS is so much easier to use, takes so much less time, and is emotionally much closer to having an “in person” conversation. Although I hear the interpreter’s voice, in my mind I can see my friend’s or associate’s conversation and facial expression. That has never been true for me on text-based relay.

Video Relay Service is the first relay service that has ever come close to providing the Deaf (and hearing) communities with “equal access,” which, to my understanding, is the goal of relay services. I know that there is much more this service could provide with proper funding, features that would bring the Deaf community even closer to equality with what the hearing population has available to them. But this won’t happen if funding is not available. The service providers are asking that the rate proposed by NECA be established as the reimbursement rate. It appears that this rate was arrived at by careful review of the available information, and that the providers feel comfortable they can continue to offer a quality service at this rate. Therefore, I strongly encourage the FCC to adopt the rate projected by NECA as the 2003-2004 rate for reimbursement of Video Relay Services.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

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